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ABSTRACT

To identify the communication activities and problems found in the world of work, the Communication Activity Questionnaire (CAQ) was developed and mailed to 500 recent graduates from professional and preprofessional colleges and departments of a midwestern university. The questionnaire requested the subjects to rate 17 communication activities in terms of how important each was to the completion of their jobs and to rate the occurrence of 23 communication problems. Forty-one percent of the subjects responded. The data they provided revealed nine activities as being most important in the world of work: (1) relationship building, (2) listening, (3) giving feedback, (4) routine information exchanging, (5) soliciting feedback, (6) persuading, (7) advising, (8) negotiating, and (9) motivating. With regard to career types, finance and personnel careers required the most communication activities for task completion while engineering required the fewest. The most typical contexts in which these activities occurred were on an individual basis or in dyads. The most serious problems facing the respondents were failing to receive needed information, not receiving information on time, difficulty in getting answers from superiors, misunderstandings between people, and failure to give clear instructions. (FL)

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An Identification of Communication Skills and Problems
Found in Organization Related Careers

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An Identification of Communication Skills and
Problems Found in Organization Related Careers

During the 1980's, the academic community more than ever before must answer the challenges of course accountability and subject matter relevancy. In the past, educators answered the accountability and relevancy issues by usually responding from a traditional pedagogical perspective, in which the purpose of education was often concerned with expanding the mind. However, with changing attitudes toward higher education, decreasing enrollments, students' concern for employment, tighter budgets, and interest in career education, educators must now deal with the pragmatics of higher education more than they have in the past. The "traditional" or "classical" approach towards education is giving way to a focus on practical skills or tools that students can use to make the successful transition to full employment in non-academic settings. The seventies have seen the introduction of non-traditional courses, such as internship programs, practicums and increasing interest in organizational communication and consulting strategies that attempt to bring practical skills and application together with the theories and research covered in the classroom. Educators must realize instruction cannot take place in a vacuum, but rather, for courses to be effective and stimulating they must be essentially microcosms of the "real world" students enter after graduation.

As we move into the 1980's, speech communication

educators must realize that before jumping on the career education bandwagon and begin teaching "real world speech communication 101," they must take the time to understand the real world their students will be entering after graduation. Speech communication educators need to identify the demands, skills, problems and various communication contexts students will face once in their chosen professions. To accomplish this we need to conduct research that will enable speech communication educators to make intelligent decisions regarding the content in "real world speech communication 101." Unless we have an understanding that accurately reflects the demands of the "real world" speech communication educators will not be very successful in meeting the challenges of course accountability and subject matter relevancy.

The purpose of this paper is to assist communication educators in understanding the entry-level communication skills needed by students entering the business and professional community. Hopefully, the information can be used by educators to develop new courses and/or evaluate existing courses regarding their focus on "real world" demands. In addition, this paper discusses the development of a standardized instrument that can be used to collect information in a variety of business and professional settings. This paper will discuss the procedures used to collect the data, the results of the survey and suggestions for what skills should be handled in "real world 101."

Proceedures

In an attempt to identify the communication activities and problems found in the world of work, the CAQ (Communication Activity Questionnaire) was developed. The CAQ instrument is a second generation questionnaire, modified from an earlier study¹ and based on the job analysis work of McCormick² and a literature review of approximately twenty studies³ focusing on communication skills and problems in organizations. The goal was to develop a standardized set of items that would be meaningful to the respondent⁴ as well as a set of items that would be applicable across a variety of jobs or careers and organizational types. Before the final version of the CAQ was prepared, all aspects of the questionnaire were field tested by approximately 100 students.⁵

In an effort to collect information regarding communication activities and problems facing people in the world of work, a stratified random sample consisting of 500 recent graduates⁶ from professional and pre-professional colleges and departments was constructed by the University of Nebraska Alumni Association. The following procedure was employed in collecting the data: (1) a postcard explaining the project and the arrival date of the questionnaire was sent to all people on the list one week before the questionnaire was mailed; (2) a questionnaire was mailed along with a cover letter and an addressed, prepaid return

envelope; (3) a follow-up postcard reminding them to return the questionnaire was sent out one week after the mailing of the questionnaire; and (4) a follow-up questionnaire was mailed to all 500 with a revised cover letter and another prepaid return envelope.

The CAQ contained five questions. The first question asked respondents to rate seventeen communication activities in terms of how important the activity was to the completion of their job. Importance was rated on a scale from zero to five as follows: (0) does not apply; (1) very minor; (2) low; (3) average; (4) high; and (5) extremely high. Respondents were asked to think of the importance of each activity with regard to their superior, subordinates, and co-workers. Communication activities were judged important if their mean rating was approximately 3.0 or higher. Respondents were then asked to (#2) rank the six communication activities (from the list of seventeen) most important to their job success; (#3) indicate what percentage of time is spent in different situations (working with an individual; dyad; small group; and large group); (#4) list and describe those communication skills that they wish they would have been exposed to while attending college; and (#5) rate the occurrence of twenty-three communication problems on a scale from zero to five (does not apply; nominal; occasional; moderate; considerable; and very substantial).

Demographic information was collected on type and size

of the organization, job title and number of years in present position. After the responses were coded, a computer assisted analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, subprogram Frequencies.

Results

One hundred and ninety-two questionnaires were returned and considered for the final analysis. Of the 500 CAQ's that were mailed out, thirty were returned-because of address problems resulting in a return rate of 41%. The overall means in Table 1 indicate that the communication activities rated most important by people in the world of work were: relationship building (3.87); listening (3.70); giving feedback (3.57); routine information exchange (3.47); and soliciting feedback (3.39). When looking at specific communication directions (superior, subordinate or co-worker) the first four were consistently rated as being important to the completion of their job. Other communication activities that approached these five in importance were: persuading (2.94); advising (2.88); negotiating (2.83); and motivating (2.80). In addition to the analysis using all of the responses, three job or career clusters were also analyzed to help provide insight into the communication activities and problems people face in different occupations. The three clusters were finance,⁷ personnel⁸ and engineering.⁹

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 Place Table 1 About Here

An examination of the average ratings of importance in Table 2 for the finance cluster suggests that the most important communication activities that aid in completing the job are: relationship building (4.10); listening (4.06); giving feedback (3.91); soliciting feedback (3.73); routine information exchange (3.50); persuading (3.17); advising (3.02); and negotiating (3.01). In addition, when dealing with their superior or looking up the organizational chart, oral reporting (3.08) is added to the list of important communication activities. However, when the communication channel shifts to dealing with subordinates, negotiating drops out and motivating (3.81); instructing (3.65); giving orders (3.62); and conflict resolution (3.00) are added as important communication activities.

 Place Table 2 About Here

When looking at the overall ratings in Table 3, people in personnel oriented positions rated the following communication activities as being important regardless of communication channel: relationship building (4.29); giving feedback (4.10); listening (4.00); soliciting feedback (3.76); routine information exchange (3.72); negotiating

(3.51); persuading (3.40); motivating (3.39); and advising (3.13). The following activities were also perceived to be important when dealing with subordinates: giving orders (4.09); instructing (3.91); and conflict resolution (3.60). Otherwise the nine basic communication activities appear to be important to job completion regardless of communication channel.

Place Table 3 About Here

Table 4 suggests that for people in engineering careers, regardless of communication channel, the following activities are important for completing the job: relationship building (3.58); routine information exchange (3.41); listening (3.37); giving feedback (3.29); and soliciting feedback (3.09). The same five communication skills are important when each of the three communication channels are analyzed separately. However, when dealing with coworkers, advising (3.17) becomes a sixth communication skill.

Place Table 4 About Here

A second question in the CAQ asked respondents to rank the six communication activities from the list of seventeen found in question one in terms of importance to their job success. These results are summarized in Table 5 and

indicate that based upon the weighted scores the following communication activities are the most important to job success: 1. listening; 2. advising; 3. relationship building; 4. routine information exchange; 5. persuading; 6. instructing; and 7. motivating.

When the results are discussed according to the three career clusters (finance, personnel and engineering) the following ranking patterns emerge. The finance oriented respondents indicated that the following communication activities were most important: 1. listening; 2. advising; 3. relationship building; 4. routine information exchange; 5. giving feedback; and 6. persuading. The ranking of the six important communication skills by the personnel cluster were: 1. listening; 2. motivating; 3. relationship building; 4. advising; 5. persuading; and 6. instructing. The engineering cluster ranked the following skills as being important to their job success: 1. listening; 2. routine information exchange; 3. relationship building; 4. giving feedback; 5. negotiating; and 6. advising.

Place Table 5 About Here

The third question in the CAQ asked respondents to estimate the amount of time they spend with other people. Figure 1 suggests that people in the world of work spend approximately sixty percent of their time working with

individuals and dyads and about a third of their time in clusters and small groups. The finance people spend approximately two-thirds of their time with individuals or in dyads and another twenty-one percent in small clusters. Personnel oriented people spend approximately fifty-six percent of their time with individuals or in dyads, and almost thirty percent in clusters. Engineers spend approximately thirty-eight percent with individuals, thirty-one percent in dyads and eighteen percent in clusters.

Place Figure 1 About Here

The fourth question had respondents rating the occurrence of twenty-three communication problems and then identifying the most serious problems. Table 6 indicates that the most frequently occurring communication problems were: 1. motivating; 2. spinning wheels in meetings; 3. persuading; 4. giving clear, effective instructions; 5. fail to receive needed information; 6. communicating decisions; 7. delegating authority; and 8. difficult to get answers from superiors. The most serious problems as identified by approximately twenty percent or more of the respondents were: 1. fail to receive needed information; 2. fail to receive information on time; 3. difficult to get answers from superiors; 4. serious misunderstandings between

people; and 5. giving clear, effective instructions.

Place Table 6 About Here

Table 6 also shows the communication problems for each of the three career clusters. With regard to finance the typical problems were: 1. giving clear, effective instructions, 2. spinning of wheels in meetings; 3. fail to receive needed information; 4. fail to receive information on time; 5. persuading; and 6. communicating decisions. Finance people identified the following as the most serious problems: 1. fail to receive needed information; 2. fail to receive information on time; 3. difficult to get answers from superiors; 4. surprised by sudden unexpected events; and 5. giving clear, effective instructions.

Personnel oriented people identified the following communication problems: 1. delegating authority; 2. motivating; 3. accepting responsibility for problems; 4. giving clear, effective instructions; 5. surprised by sudden unexpected events; 6. communicating decisions; 7. backstabbing between employees; and 8. spinning of wheels in meetings. The most serious problems were: 1. fail to receive information on time; 2. fail to receive needed information; 3. giving clear, effective instructions; 4. motivating; 5. surprised by sudden unexpected events; and 6. spinning of wheels in meetings.

Engineering oriented people indicated that the following communication problems have the highest frequency of occurrence: 1. spinning of wheels in meetings; 2. accepting responsibility for problems; 3. communicating decisions; 4. fail to receive needed information; 5. giving clear, effective instructions; 6. fail to receive information on time; 7. needless or poorly planned meetings; 8. persuading; 9. motivating; 10. difficult to get answers from superiors; 11. delegating authority; and 12. making group decisions. The most serious problems for the engineers were: 1. fail to receive needed information; 2. difficult to get answers from superiors; 3. serious misunderstanding between people; 4. fail to receive information on time; and 5. giving clear, effective instructions.

The last question in the CAQ was an open-ended question asking respondents to describe those communication skills/topics that they wish they had been exposed to while attending college. Their responses were analyzed through a content analysis method. While the responses covered a broad range of communication skills and topics a number of areas were consistently mentioned. They appear in descending order of frequency: 1. oral skills (with an emphasis on oral reporting, public speaking, visual aids and interviewing); 2. persuasion (in terms of motivating and negotiating with others); 3. listening; 4. groups (developing a better understanding of work groups, conferences,

leadership and intergroup conflict); and 5. written communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a general pattern emerged from the data regarding which communication activities were considered important in the completion of daily tasks. Nine activities were identified: relationship building, listening, giving feedback, routine information exchange, soliciting feedback, persuading, advising, negotiating and motivating. The most stable aspect of this pattern consisted of the following five activities: relationship building, listening, giving feedback, routine information exchange, and soliciting feedback. Of these five the following were perceived to be important for job success: listening, relationship building, routine information exchange. In addition, advising, persuading, instructing and motivating were also judged important to job success. With regard to career types, finance and personnel careers appear to require the most communication activities for task completion while the engineering area required the fewest. All three career areas indicated that they needed the same number of communication activities for job success. The most typical contexts in which these activities are employed appears to be on an individual basis or in dyads. The most serious communication problems facing people in organizational settings were: failing to receive needed information,

receiving information on time, difficult to get answers from superiors, serious misunderstanding between people and giving clear and effective instructions. Each career group identified their own set of problems with the engineering people identifying the greatest number.

If, as educators, we are to meet the challenge of the 1980s and successfully deal with accountability and relevancy, we must continue the process of determining which communication activities are being used and are important for various careers. The development of the CAQ as a standardized instrument can help researchers continue with this task. Results from the CAQ are consistent with a variety of studies¹⁰ that have centered on entry level communication skills necessary for students to make a successful transition to full time employment. The skills that seem to be repeated most often are: listening, giving and soliciting feedback, relationship building, routine information exchange, persuasion/motivation, advising, instructing, followed by oral reporting, small group problem solving and interviewing. Obviously, no single semester course can ever hope to prepare even the most ambitious student with complete mastery of what he will need once he begins a career. At best we need to offer the critical communication skills and concepts and to provide impetus for our students to continue progressing in the mastery of those skills. We also need to develop teaching

strategies for bringing these communication skills into the classroom; that is, creating ways to teach the communication skills and deal with the communication problems that our research suggests are important. Clavier's¹¹ study of the SCA placement service suggests that the field of Speech Communication is becoming more diversified (at least at the Ph.D. level) and that diversification must extend into the development of undergraduate curricula designed to answer the needs of present and future students and the world of work these students will enter. If the speech field is to prepare students for non-academic jobs, various types of career programs in communication need to be developed at colleges throughout the United States.¹² It is now our responsibility as educators to make those intelligent decisions about what should and should not be taught and to convert our observations in this report into something that can be taught in the classroom. If this can be accomplished, then, maybe it is time to begin teaching "real world 101."

Footnotes

1. See: Vincent DiSalvo, et al. "Communication Skills Needed by Persons in Business Organizations," Communication Education, 25 (November 1976) pp. 269-275.
2. E. J. McCormick, P. J. Jeanneret, R. C. Mecham, "A Study of Job Characteristics and Job Dimensions as Based on the P.A.Q.," Journal of Applied Psychology, 56 (1972), pp. 347-368.
3. Vincent DiSalvo, "A Summary of Current Research Identifying Communication Skills in Various Organizational Contexts," Communication Education (Spring 1980).
4. The job analysis procedure is basically behavior centered as opposed to being job or task centered and is applicable to all positions in organizations. The language used with the job analysis format is grounded in language used in the organizational community.
5. After pilot testing the CAQ both students and respondents were asked to evaluate the questionnaire in terms of length, graphic design, understanding of terminology and operationalization and ease of use. The final version of the CAQ was developed from these data.
6. The subjects had graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during the 1975-1979 time period from the colleges of business, engineering, architecture, agriculture, pre-med, pre-dentistry, and pre-law. An analysis of the returned questionnaires indicated that approximately 25 states were represented, the strongest concentration of responses coming from the mid-west region.
7. People having finance oriented careers had the following job titles: accountant, purchasing agent, auditor, C.P.A., comptroller, bank examiner.
8. People holding personnel oriented jobs had the following job titles: supervisor; manager, production supervisor.
9. People holding engineering oriented jobs had the following job titles: construction engineer, design engineer, utility engineer, mechanical engineer.

10. DiSalvo, Vincent and Jeffery K. Lukehart, "Identifying and Teaching Skills for the Organizational Communicator: A Strategic Approach for Competency Development." Paper presented at the American Business Communication Association Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, December, 1978.
11. Clavier, David E., "Twelve-Year Employment Trends in Speech Communication." Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Antonio, Texas, November, 1979.
12. McDowell, Earl E. and Sally Jo Power-Ross, "A Survey of Attitudes Toward Non-academic Employment Areas and Perceived Employment Skills by SCA Placement Users at the SCA Convention, 1978." Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Antonio, Texas, November, 1979.

TABLE 1

IMPORTANCE OF TYPE OF COMMUNICATION SKILL BY DIRECTION*

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication			Average
	Superiors	Subordinates	Coworkers	
Advising	2.56	3.10	2.98	2.88
Persuading	3.05	2.89	2.87	2.94
Instructing	1.52	3.40	2.52	2.48
Interviewing	1.03	1.46	1.41	1.30
Routine Information Exchange	3.39	3.50	3.52	3.47
Public Speaking	1.59	1.22	1.43	1.41
Oral Report Giving	2.71	1.88	2.21	2.27
Negotiating	3.10	2.52	2.87	2.83
Giving Orders	1.39	3.32	2.39	2.37
Small Groups	2.17	2.09	2.60	2.29
Small Group Leadership	1.72	2.34	2.49	2.18
Conflict Resolution	1.99	2.57	2.47	2.34
Relationship Building	3.74	3.89	3.97	3.87
Listening	3.69	3.71	3.71	3.70
Giving Feedback	3.62	3.59	3.51	3.57
Soliciting Feedback	3.34	3.39	3.43	3.39
Motivating	2.05	3.49	2.85	2.80

*Note: All responses are based on an N of 190.

TABLE 2
IMPORTANCE OF TYPE OF COMMUNICATION SKILL
FOR FINANCE ORIENTED CAREERS*

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication			Average
	Superiors	Subordinates	Coworkers	
Advising	2.97	3.13	2.97	3.02
Persuading	3.49	3.19	2.84	3.17
Instructing	1.76	3.65	2.68	2.70
Interviewing	.78	1.27	1.27	1.11
Routine Information Exchange	3.43	3.30	3.76	3.50
Public Speaking	1.54	1.16	1.30	1.33
Oral Report Giving	3.08	1.92	2.32	2.44
Negotiating	3.51	2.73	2.78	3.01
Giving Orders	1.30	3.62	2.30	2.41
Small Groups	2.31	2.40	2.81	2.51
Small Group Leadership	1.68	2.84	2.86	2.46
Conflict Resolution	2.30	3.00	2.78	2.69
Relationship Building	4.00	4.08	4.22	4.10
Listening	4.27	3.84	4.08	4.06
Giving Feedback	4.03	3.84	3.86	3.91
Soliciting Feedback	3.78	3.59	3.83	3.73
Motivating	2.03	3.81	2.86	2.90

*Note: N = 37.

TABLE 3
IMPORTANCE OF TYPE OF COMMUNICATION SKILL
FOR PERSONNEL ORIENTED CAREERS*

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication			Average
	Superiors	Subordinates	Coworkers	
Advising	2.46	3.91	3.03	3.13
Persuading	3.26	3.71	3.23	3.40
Instructing	1.43	3.91	2.57	2.64
Interviewing	.89	2.46	1.97	1.77
Routine Information Exchange	3.57	4.11	3.49	3.72
Public Speaking	1.23	1.26	1.40	1.30
Oral Report Giving	2.94	2.66	2.34	2.64
Negotiating	3.66	3.60	3.26	3.51
Giving Orders	1.08	4.09	2.83	2.67
Small Groups	2.34	2.31	2.51	2.39
Small Group Leadership	2.29	2.97	2.60	2.62
Conflict Resolution	1.97	3.60	2.94	2.84
Relationship Building	4.17	4.46	4.23	4.29
Listening	3.60	4.40	4.00	4.00
Giving Feedback	3.89	4.43	3.71	4.01
Soliciting Feedback	3.57	4.06	3.66	3.76
Motivating	2.31	4.31	3.40	3.34

*Note: N = 35.

TABLE 4

IMPORTANCE OF TYPE OF COMMUNICATION SKILL
FOR ENGINEERING ORIENTED CAREERS*

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication			Average
	Superiors	Subordinates	Coworkers	
Advising	2.27	2.63	3.17	2.69
Persuading	2.50	2.37	2.83	2.57
Instructing	1.57	2.87	2.60	2.35
Interviewing	.60	.80	.73	.71
Routine Information Exchange	3.23	3.37	3.63	3.41
Public Speaking	1.57	.70	1.07	1.11
Oral Report Giving	2.70	1.53	2.20	2.14
Negotiating	2.60	1.93	2.77	2.43
Giving Orders	1.43	2.63	2.00	2.02
Small Groups	2.07	1.73	2.90	2.23
Small Group Leadership	1.17	2.03	2.43	1.88
Conflict Resolution	1.83	2.00	2.36	2.06
Relationship Building	3.33	3.60	3.80	3.58
Listening	3.43	3.27	3.40	3.37
Giving Feedback	3.33	3.13	3.40	3.29
Soliciting Feedback	3.20	2.80	3.27	3.09
Motivating	1.47	2.90	2.30	2.22

*Note: N = 30.

TABLE 5

WEIGHTED SCORES AND RANKINGS OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS
JUDGED IMPORTANT TO JOB SUCCESS

Skill	Job Type			
	Overall	Finance	Personnel	Engineer
Advising	313 (2)	69 (2)	58 (3)	32 (6)
Persuading	208 (5)	38 (6)	39 (5)	23 (10)
Instructing	198 (6)	29 (7)	38 (6)	31 (7)
Interviewing	62 (14)	20 (10)	14 (13)	0 (17)
Routine Information Exchange	206 (4)	45 (4)	15 (12)	58 (2)
Public Speaking	57 (15)	1 (17)	0 (17)	4 (16)
Oral Report Giving	88 (13)	14 (13)	9 (14)	30 (8)
Negotiating	161 (9)	19 (12)	32 (8)	35 (5)
Giving Orders	126 (11)	12 (14)	35 (7)	25 (9)
Small Groups	51 (16)	8 (15)	6 (16)	15 (12)
Small Group Leadership	42 (17)	7 (16)	9 (14)	9 (15)
Conflict Resolution	117 (12)	25 (9)	32 (8)	14 (14)
Relationship Building	263 (3)	52 (3)	58 (3)	39 (3)
Listening	400 (1)	95 (1)	64 (1)	62 (1)
Giving Feedback	180 (8)	43 (5)	32 (8)	37 (4)
Soliciting Feedback	153 (10)	28 (8)	31 (11)	22 (11)
Motivating	197 (7)	20 (10)	60 (2)	15 (12)

FIGURE 1

PERCENT OF TIME SPENT IN DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION CONTEXTS

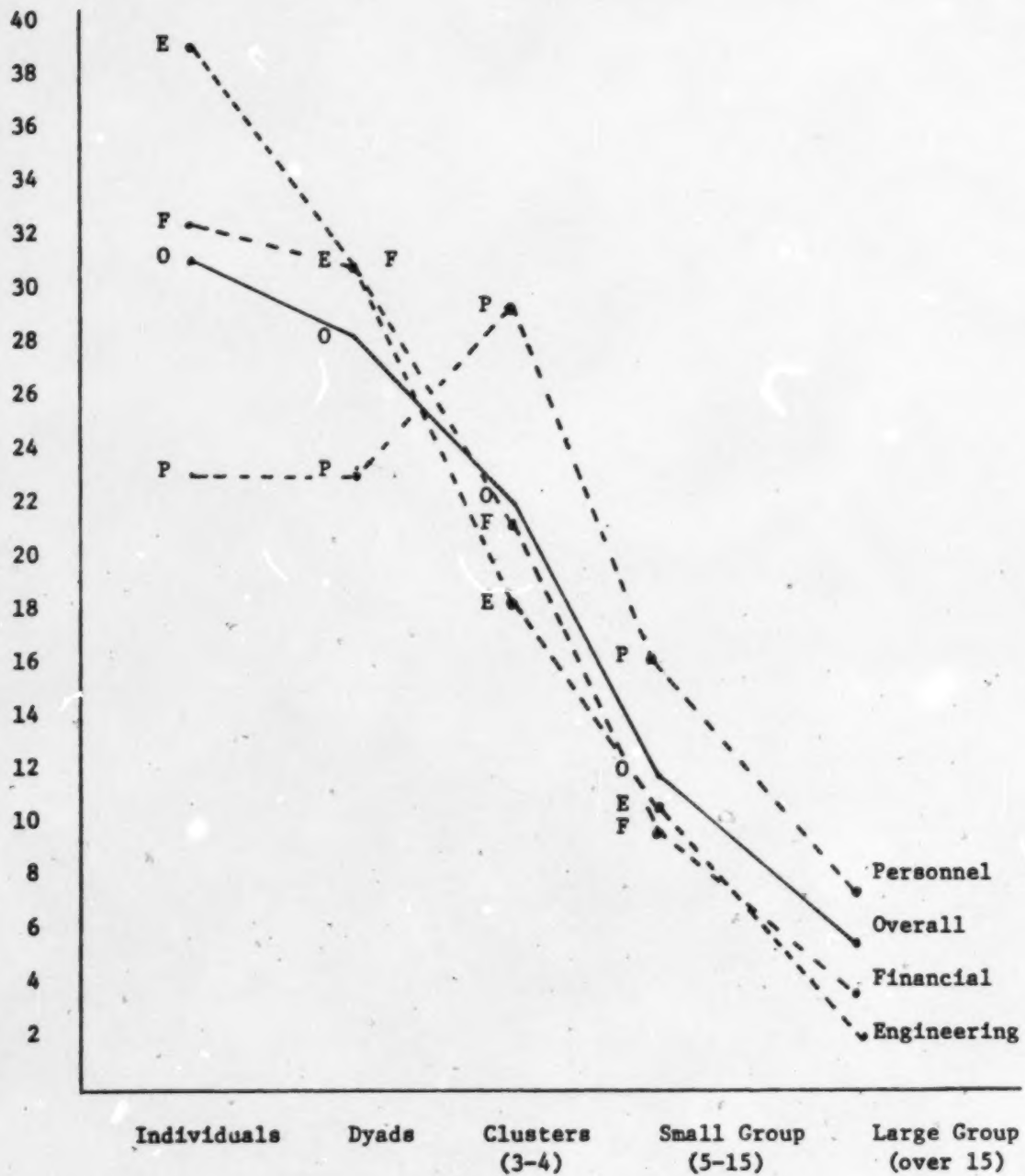


TABLE 6

OCCURRENCE RATE OF COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AND MOST
SERIOUS PROBLEMS THAT AFFECT JOB PERFORMANCE

Communication Problem	Overall	Job Type		
		Finance	Personnel	Engineering
1 Fail to receive needed information	2.63*	2.89*	2.46*	2.83*
2 Fail to receive information on time	2.47*	2.76*	2.43*	2.69*
3 Not enough face-to-face communication	2.11	1.83	2.06	2.33
4 Serious misunderstandings between people	2.31*	2.31	2.49	2.20*
5 Surprised by sudden unexpected events	2.36*	2.36*	2.76*	2.32
6 Spinning of wheels in meetings	2.74	2.89	2.55*	3.22
7 Needless or poorly planned meetings	2.39	2.26	2.28	2.65
8 Difficult to get answers from superiors	2.56*	2.47*	2.45	2.62*
9 Difficult for bosses to get feedback from subordinates	2.11	2.35	2.12	2.00
10 Receive too much information	1.62	1.69	1.75	1.29
11 Backstabbing going on between employees	2.25	2.35	2.59	1.68
12 Occurrences of employee sabotage	1.57	1.22	2.00	1.36
13 Little respect for differing opinions	2.01	2.03	2.06	1.81
14 Listening actively	2.51	2.64	2.71*	2.21
15 Making group decisions	2.33	1.97	2.43	2.56
16 Delegating authority	2.56	2.41	2.97	2.61
17 Communicating decisions	2.57	2.54	2.69	2.86
18 Reluctance to utilize information at hand	1.93	1.91	1.97	2.04
19 Lost or distorted messages	2.11	2.29	2.14	1.83
20 Giving clear, effective instructions	2.69*	3.07*	2.77*	2.80*
21 Accepting responsibility for problems	2.51	2.65	2.86	2.87
22 Persuading	2.69	2.75	2.77	2.63
23 Motivating	2.78*	2.25	2.44*	2.63

*Note: Was identified as a serious problem by approximately 20% or more.